

NAEP *Proficient* vs. NAEP Proficiency in Subject¹

Bert D. Stoneberg

The Albertson Foundation's "Don't Fail Idaho" media blitz has asked us to rethink education for Idaho because NAEP 2011 test results proved that about 60% of Idaho's fourth and eighth grade students were "not proficient" in reading and mathematics. Not proficient in the sense that 60% of our students are not making the grade, are falling further behind, and will never catch up.



Not to panic, though! Don't Fail Idaho's gloomy claims about student achievement in Idaho were based on an incorrect understanding of the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) achievement levels.

The descriptors in Table 1 were collected from a variety of NAEP sources. They help define and clarify how NAEP's *Proficient* and *Basic* achievement levels should be understood, interpreted, and used.

Table 1. Defining the difference between the NAEP Proficient achievement level and NAEP proficiency in subject (i.e., the NAEP Basic achievement level) by using (1) English language descriptors from NAEP literature and (2) plausible classroom letter grades from A+ to F.

NAEP Achievement Level	English Language Descriptors Used to Explain the Meaning of the NAEP Achievement Levels	Letter Grade (A-F)	
		Stoneberg (2007)	Ravitch (2012)
<i>Advanced</i>		A to A+	A+
<i>Proficient</i>	Some of the best students you know Many words and terms above grade level Mastery of complex material Higher than grade level performance	B+ to A	A
<i>Basic</i>	<u>Proficiency in subject</u> (common language meaning) Overall understanding of grade appropriate text More than minimal competency	C- to B	B and C
<i>Below Basic</i>	Minimal competency	F to D+	Concern

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It is important -- even crucial -- to understand and remember that

- NAEP uses *Proficient* to name one achievement level,
- NAEP uses "proficiency in the subject" to define the Basic achievement level, and
- NAEP *Proficient* is not the same thing as NAEP's proficiency in the subject.

If the National Assessment Governing Board had elected to use letter grades A to F instead of achievement level names, they might have used A+ for Advanced, used A for Proficient, and used B and C for Basic.

Unfortunately, Don't Fail Idaho focused on the name *Proficient* rather than on "proficiency in subject." As a result, the campaign claimed that more than 60% of Idaho students failed to exhibit at least an "A" performance in reading and mathematics. Not a useful statistic. It told us absolutely nothing about the "B" and "C" students who actually demonstrated NAEP proficiency in reading and mathematics.

On NAEP 2011, 31% of Idaho fourth graders and 19% of our eighth graders were not proficient in reading, while 17% of our fourth graders and 23% of our eighth graders were not proficient in mathematics. None of these percentages square with the 60% claimed by the Don't Fail Idaho media blitz.

It should be noted that on NAEP 2011 all four of the "not proficient in subject" statistics for Idaho students were lower than those of their national peers.

One thing for sure, misreporting student achievement data is not going to help anyone make informed decisions about K-12 education in Idaho.

References

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Stoneberg, B.D. (2007, May 27). Using NAEP to confirm state test results in the No Child Left Behind Act. *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation*, 12(5), 1-10. Retrieved from <http://pareonline.net/genpare.asp?wh=4&abt=stoneberg>

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NAEP 2013 Results for Idaho Added on November 18, 2013

NAEP 2013 reading and mathematics <i>Proficient</i> and proficiency in subject for Idaho 4 th and 8 th graders.				
Percent at/above	Read 4th	Read 8th	Math 4th	Math 8th
<i>Proficient</i>	33	38	40	36
<i>Basic (proficiency)</i>	68	82	83	78

Narratives comparing NAEP 2013 reading and mathematics *Proficient* and proficiency in subject for Idaho 4th and 8th graders with their counterparts in the nation's public schools.

- On the NAEP 2013 mathematics test, 40 percent of Idaho fourth-graders scored at or above NAEP Proficient, while 41 percent of fourth-graders in the nation's public schools scored at or above NAEP Proficient. However, 83 percent of Idaho fourth-graders and 82 percent of fourth-graders in the nation's public schools demonstrated proficiency in mathematics on the NAEP 2013 mathematics test.
- On the NAEP 2013 reading test, 33 percent of Idaho fourth-graders scored at or above NAEP Proficient, while 34 percent of fourth-graders in the nation's public schools scored at or above NAEP Proficient. However, 68 percent of Idaho fourth-graders and 67 percent of fourth-graders in the nation's public schools demonstrated proficiency in reading on the NAEP 2013 reading test.
- On the NAEP 2013 mathematics test, 36 percent of Idaho eighth-graders scored at or above NAEP Proficient, while 34 percent of eighth-graders in the nation's public schools scored at or above NAEP Proficient. However, 78 percent of Idaho eighth-graders and 73 percent of eighth-graders in the nation's public schools demonstrated proficiency in mathematics on the NAEP 2013 mathematics test.
- On the NAEP 2013 reading test, 38 percent of Idaho eighth-graders scored at or above NAEP Proficient, while 34 percent of eighth-graders in the nation's public schools scored at or above NAEP Proficient. However, 82 percent of Idaho eighth-graders and 77 percent of eighth-graders in the nation's public schools demonstrated proficiency in reading on the NAEP 2013 reading test.

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Author's Note

Bert Stoneberg was Idaho's NAEP State Coordinator from 2002 to 2012. He is now retired, but doing some independent research and consulting.

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Suggested citation: Stoneberg, B.D. (2013, July 27). *NAEP Proficient vs. NAEP Proficiency in Subject*. Available online: <http://k12researchidaho.com/pdf/proficient-vs-proficiency.pdf>

